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Episode 44—Overcoming Emotional Abandonment in Marriage

Guests: Neil and Sharol Josephson

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Sharol: Our biggest season of drift happened about 18, 19 years into marriage. We were like literally roommates living in the same house—very nice, accommodating. But we had really lost each other in the middle of that and not intentionally and not purposefully. Boy, when we found ourselves in that spot, we looked at each other like, “How did this happen? How did we get here?”

Ron: From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network, this is *FamilyLife Blended*. I’m Ron Deal.

This donor-supported podcast brings together timeless wisdom and practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

Welcome to episode 44, where we’re talking about emotional abandonment in marriage and moving from disconnected to connected.

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Do differences in your marriage ever make you feel disconnected emotionally? Do you struggle with your partner’s idiosyncrasies? You know those little things that just drive you crazy sometimes. I think every couple does. I know Nan and I certainly do. On some level, we all wrestle with that.

Blended family couples are dealing with a lot of step stress, right? And the last thing they need is something else to irritate their couple relationship and make them drift away from each other, but it happens.

Neil and Sharol Josephson are the national directors of FamilyLife Canada, our sister organization to the north. They’ve been married for 41 years and they have four remarkable grandchildren—remarkable?—I think Neil and Sharol wrote this bio—four *remarkable* grandchildren. They are conference speakers and leaders who care deeply about families.

Here's my conversation with Neil and Sharol Josephson:

You guys work in marriage ministry, marriage and family ministry there with FamilyLife Canada. How long have you guys been doing marriage and family ministry?

Neil: Full time for 14 years now.

Ron: Okay, and what do you like about it? What is the joy for you in talking, teaching, coaching, mentoring couples?

Sharol: Well, lots. I love—I love watching the light bulbs come on in people's eyes. I love seeing them look at each other and say, "I didn't know that about you," when we're mentoring. I love to give couples language to say things that they've not been able to say before or talk about things they've never been able to access before. How about you?

Neil: I love being around when people go to a deeper place than they have been before. We play some kind of role in that, usually by asking a question or encouraging; sometimes by information. If you can push people just a little bit deeper, a little closer to what's true about their life, about God, about everything, it's really fun to be in those moments.

Sharol: Wow. You're way deeper than I am. [Laughter] I also love—I also love making couples laugh.

Neil: Yes, for sure.

Sharol: It's one of the fun things we do in our conferences. We have a lot of fun. It's just—I don't know—there's something very healing and warming and community gathering about laughter.

Ron: The educator in me is connecting those dots. To help people laugh about things that are taking them deeper. Because sometimes when we start looking at ourselves and say, "Oh wow, I've just got to figure out something about me," or "I don't know how to articulate this to you," those are hard places. But if we can find a little bit of humor in it; we can laugh at ourselves a little bit, it makes it easier, does it not?

Neil: So true. Isn't that the art of trying to help people learn?

Ron: Yes.

Neil: Just to find that dance where you take deep, and they come up for air and you take them deeper. It's great.

Ron: Yes. I would even say to people listening right now is try to do that for yourselves. It's okay—now don't bring deep sarcasm to a moment that doesn't call for that because that will make things worse— [Laughter]—but be a little light hearted about who you are.

Don't you think that's one of the greatest gifts that we can give our spouse is for me to not be so serious about me; for me to be willing to go, "Yes, I'm kind of messed up," and laugh at myself just a little bit?

Sharol: Oh yes. Oh yes. And laugh—I think this is one of the benefits of longer marriages, you get to kind of laugh at each other.

Neil: There's so much material.

Sharol: There's the quirks and quarks that make up our spouse and our life together. These are some of the fun things that make marriage a joy. I agree with you. Lightness helps.

Neil: We've been married 41 years and we've learned a lot about each other. We're still learning a lot about each other. I'm this weird mix. I'm a youngest child, so I generally like to have fun. But I have this deal where I can get just really intense and not let go of things.

Sometimes I have to remind myself like, "Hey, you're a little too intense here." Sharol's got some code words to warn me off. But yes, when we're teaching *live*, we're always thinking every seven or eight minutes we've got to create a light moment. You just can't take people to—up to ten and leave them for a long period of time.

Ron: Okay. We're going to come back to a couple of things you just said. You don't realize it, but you just dug your own grave. We'll come back to that in a minute.

Sharol: Oh, wow. [Laughter]

Ron: At least you have a little foreshadowing. But before we do that, let's just enter into this conversation about differences in marriage. On FamilyLifeCanada.com you guys have an article on differences and the drift in marriage. Let's just talk around that, because, Sharol, we want to help the lights come on for couples, alright, so listen up. In that article you guys make this statement: "The goal as it relates to differences—the goal is to be together; not to be the same."

What do you mean?

Sharol: First of all, that article encapsulates everything we've come to learn about what gets in the way of a healthy marriage—we think. When couples run into trouble, you can put their troubles in one of those two categories. They're bumping into their differences or they are dealing with drift.

The difference piece is people feel like they have to—certainly younger couples feel like when they bump into their differences, they feel like there’s something wrong with them or something wrong with their marriage.

What we try to encourage people to see, couples to see, is these differences are normal. As a matter of fact, that’s what attracted you to the other. It’s the otherness of the other that we’re drawn to. Then it’s those differences that start to make us a little bit crazy. What was cute when you were dating becomes like, “Oh, that is so weird,” when you’re married. [Laughter] Eventually down the road it’s “That makes me crazy!”

But I think if we can shift that concept—and this is what we try to help couples do—identifying the differences for one thing, normalizing the differences, and then flipping them on their head and saying those differences are actually what is going to keep you strong as a couple. It’s going to keep you interested. That’s where the chemistry comes from. If we want to flatline the other partner so that they’re just exactly like us, we’ll get bored with them.

I will say—I’ll speak as a woman—I think we do that to our men. We try to make them like us because then they’d be a lot easier to live with if they were a little more like us. Then we do that. We flatline them. We make them like us. We neutralize them. Then we lose interest in them. It probably works with the other gender, too, but I’m just speaking for me as a woman. Those differences keep the spark, keep the liveliness and make us strong.

Ron: So there’s something really good about the irritation that comes sometimes from within. [Laughter] Is that what we just said?

Neil: Sure, sure.

Ron: Yes, it’s kind of like that. At least life’s not *boring* anymore. There’s something of interest in how we have to work together.

Sharol: Yes.

Neil: Isn’t one of the stock phrases when couples are ending a marriage, “irreconcilable differences”? That’s interesting because I think a lot of our differences are irreconcilable. That’s what is behind that statement to me is we’re trying to say to people, “Don’t make your goal to erase the differences,” because that would imply that the goal is to be identical.

God didn’t make you that way. You’ll lose the richness. You’ll lose that creative tension. They have to navigate the differences. I think that we just have learned to caution, as Sharol said, particularly younger couples who think, “Oh, we’re so in love and the longer we’re together we’ll just be like this all the—” Oh, I just used my hands on radio.

Ron: Yes. [Laughter]

Neil: “Hey, we’ll just be identical all the time,” and it just doesn’t happen.

Ron: In a book I wrote with David Olsen called *The Smart Stepfamily Marriage*, we quote David Augsburger who years ago wrote a little piece about accepting differences. He said there’s kind of like four phases. “Couples,” he said, “accommodate their differences or they tolerate one another’s differences.”

“Often when you’re dating,” and like Sharol said, “that can be something that attracts you to them. They’re different than you in this way and you find that refreshing, so there’s a little attraction there. After the wedding,” he says, “we try to eliminate the objectionable differences that we see in the other person. Then we begin to appreciate them.” Then he says, “Really mature lovers and partners who have *really* worked hard at this can get to a place where they *celebrate* the differences; even delight in those differences.”

That kept ringing in my head as I was reading your article because you guys were talking about the very same thing. But that journey I think is a little bit of a challenging one. Let’s go inside, accommodate and maybe even attracted to differences. That’s where it starts but then it becomes eliminate, “I want to get rid of that.”

One of the things that struck me as you were talking just a minute ago was I think when we’re trying to eliminate, and as Sharol said, make the other like us, what we’re really trying to do is “I’m not having—if you’re like me, I don’t have to work anymore. I don’t have to work at this because we’re both the same. We’re both going to get up the same.”

Neil: Ah, yes.

Ron: We’re going—if we’re going to have this style the same, we’re going to have this preference the same, and all of a sudden, I have to sacrifice *nothing* to be in relationship with you. Why is it so hard to die to ourselves?

Sharol: Yes. [Laughter]

Ron: Isn’t that just one of those things where you go, “Yes, each and every day I got to figure out how to die to myself today.”

Sharol: Yes. We tell couples that you’re probably going to go through that eliminate stage. It’s just part of a natural arc of a marriage. You’re probably going to hit that. Try to make that season as short as possible because the tools we use to try to eliminate differences—and we’re not talking about eliminating bad behavior—

Neil: Right.

Sharol: —bad behavior should be eliminated—we’re talking about differences, those personality differences, those life experience differences, those kind of family of origin differences, those things that we bring to a marriage that are just unique to us. When we try to eliminate those things, the tools we use are really toxic. We use manipulation. We use comparison. We use—

Neil: —sarcasm, nagging.

Sharol: Instead of confronting our differences; saying this difference is actually a challenge for us so let’s figure it out, we—it kind of leaks out. We tell couples you’re going to probably enter a season where you’re going to try to eliminate the differences, because you’re going to want—and actually if you recognize it, the whole point is you’re trying to get along better which is why you’re trying to eliminate the differences.

Just recognize it but realize that’s not long-term health, so keep that season of your marriage as short as possible. Move into the appreciate and even celebrate seasons as quickly as you can.

Neil: Yes.

Ron: I really like that part about getting along better because I do think that’s the end game for most people. Let’s come back to that. Tools we use—could we break that down a little bit more? What are the tools we use? When you said that, I think most people hearing it might have gone, “What do you mean? I don’t have a tool to try to eliminate this difference in my husband or my wife.”

Yes, we do. It’s the stuff we do. It’s the reactions we have. It’s the way we respond. Essentially, to be manipulative or to criticize or to say, “Why do you do it that way?” is to say, that’s your tool, trying to get them to be a little different. Tell me about these tools. What are the tools you guys use in your marriage? What are the tools you’ve seen other people use?

Neil: Sharol and I are really nice people raised by really nice parents. [Laughter] Honestly, they’re great. But we’re pretty good avoiders, so I’d say the tools we used are more subtle.

Sharol: More passive aggressive.

Neil: I would say more silence. You can use silence, right?

Ron: Right.

Neil: Like, “I’m not happy with you but I won’t confront you; but I won’t really talk to you either.” Silence in our relationship usually leads to less affection, less intimacy. Though I don’t think we’ve ever really used sex as a weapon per se, but I think—

Ron: It could be.

Neil: —that can come in there.

Sharol: For sure.

Neil: I think another tool, a very insidious tool that is very, very common is comparison and criticism. In other words, instead of saying, “I’m really disappointed about this,” it’s like, “Oh, you know their marriage is so much better,” or “Why aren’t you like her?” or—I don’t know, man. The comparison thing is really, really—because comparison is always hurtful, but it really strikes at the heart of you *chose* this person and you made a commitment to this person. Now you’re comparing them.

I think it creates an insecurity to how committed you are to *me* personally. That’s a tool that’s really toxic in the long term.

Ron: Yes, that’s a good observation. I think the social media world gives us access to 8,000 things to compare our spouses to. Of course, it’s fake news. Facebook is “Fakebook.” Whatever people present is generally going to be the thing they want everybody to see. So when we look at that stuff, of course, it looks better than what our life has.

It’s easy to slip into those comparisons. Even if you’re not saying it—it just occurred to me—even if I’m not saying this to my wife, I’m saying it about her in my head.

Sharol: Yes.

Neil: Sure.

Ron: That’s making the differences gap wider, right?

Neil: The dark side of the comparison game is we always compare our weakness to somebody else’s strength or our spouse’s weakness to somebody else’s strength. If you really want to play the comparison game fairly you should compare their strength to other’s weaknesses, but it’s rarely done that way.

I challenge everybody who’s listening. Honestly, when you compare doesn’t it usually—you’re using it against yourself or you’re using it against your spouse or maybe even your kids. You’re comparing your kids. That’s the toxic dark side of this comparison thing.

Ron: Yes.

A thing we've talked about before on this podcast, in particular talking to stepfamily couples, is at least one of you in this blended family marriage has been married before or at least partnered before. You were in an intimate relationship that ended whether by death or by divorce, so you have natural comparison—

Neil: Boy, that's so true.

Ron: —because you've walked through life with somebody. If that marriage ended in the death of your spouse and it was a healthy relationship, then you have this living memory of a really good spouse or "Wow! We didn't have as many differences. We got along easier."

It's real easy for you to get caught up in the game of spouse number two versus spouse number one.

Sharol: Yes. It's like competing against a saint.

Neil: We had a woman tell us that.

Sharol: We had a woman tell us that. She said, "It's like I live my life every day being compared to a woman who was a saint. Now was she really a saint? I don't know but in my husband's mind she has achieved sainthood and I'll *never* get there." [Laughter]

Ron: Yes, and there's a flip side to this. As you say that, it makes me realize so if you're the partner who was married previously, part of what you need to do to honor this marriage and your spouse is to really turn down that comparison game and not allow your internal dialogue to—I'm going to say this—it's going to be too strong, but you'll get the point—to not have an affair with the prior saint.

You can see how easily somebody could slip into that ongoing comparison where you live on in the little fantasy of your mind what *could* have been or what *was* that is just now slipped out of your hands, but this relationship certainly isn't that. You've really got to guard against that.

Sharol: Yes.

I think all couples are hesitant to talk about their disappointment in this area if their differences are showing up, but it leaks out. I think we're way better served if we actually look at it head on, acknowledge those differences and then work together to understand each other and appreciate each other. I think the disappointment leaks out.

Ron: Yes. I want to come back to some of the *kinds* of differences that we have. Before I make that jump, just a word for somebody who's listening if you've been divorced

before. Let's say that relationship ended very poorly and you're thinking, "I don't ever have to compare number two to number one because that didn't work out so well." Just be cautious that you don't find yourself going, "Oh, no. I'm seeing something that looks vaguely like what this other person did that was part of our demise."

Now you're feeding in negativity to the difference gap that you're seeing in your spouse *now*. When really, if we were to put it on a 10 scale, what you're seeing in this relationship is a two. The last relationship, it was a nine point five. But twos are not nines, right? So don't make that jump and put yourself in a hole when there's no reason to put yourself in that hole.

I'm sitting here thinking there are differences that are harder to appreciate than others. Some things are more irritating than others. Like, one person's on time; the other person's late. One person's a spender; one person's a saver. One person has a little higher initiative/desire for sex; the other has a little lower desire for sex. One's quiet; one's talkative. One's male; one's female. [Laughter] We could go on for a long time around these.

Neil: It's endless!

Ron: It is. It is. But the reality is some of these differences are easier to figure out "How do I live with that?" than others are, right? You guys have done some work around—in your article you talk about Gottman's 69 percent of problems are perpetual problems. Talk around that. What is that? Tell our listeners what that is.

Neil: His research—you see people live by the myth that couples that they believe to be happier than them or their idealized vision of "This is how we should be living." For many folks that idealized version has no conflict. Gottman's research says, no, no. Unhappy couples has 69 percent of their conflict is perpetual. They think they are a bad couple because "Why are we having this fight about money again? It's always about money." "Why are we struggling about sex? It's always about sex."

Then he does his research and goes, yes, you know what? Happy couples—people that self-decide "We're at peace. We're content. We're glad to be together," say what are your issues? They name the same 69 percent.

It's the myth that I think compounds our difficulty in moving ahead. Because if you think it's the person, you're not going to tackle the issue, are you?

Ron: Right.

Neil: If you can say, "No, no, actually, it's the issue." Like, it's good to say that we have issues. We've got to be honest. Like, "This isn't feeling good to me," or "We need to make some progress here. I wish we could be different." But if you believe it's the person, you won't have any energy to tackle the issue.

Ron: Okay, so you're saying the difference is instead of seeing your spouse as "You're always late, you're always late, you're always late; there is some deficient in you," then you reframe that to being, "This is about *my* time and how I function being on time or being early and how you function around time." So it's not the *person* who's the mistake; it's the "We have to figure out how we navigate this space together."

Sharol: Can I tell you about one difference that we have been bumping into a lot in this COVID season? Neil and I, but primarily with a lot of the couples we've been coaching—and that is this whole idea of how we manage stress, how we handle stress, and how we handle—in uncertainty. Some of us tend to be minimizers and some of us tend to be magnifiers.

One person in the couple is entirely comfortable with going to the grocery store during this season. It's no big deal.

Ron: That would be a minimizer, right?

Sharol: That's a minimizer.

Neil: Yes, "Don't need a mask. It's not a real thing. Nobody's going to get sick here."

Sharol: The other person is very concerned about the issues that our kids shouldn't go outside. Nobody should be walking out of doors. They're on the opposite extreme.

Where it gets to be a problem in a couple—these are differences—they're natural differences—nobody's wrong; nobody's right—they're just seeing the world differently—where it gets to be a problem for a couple is when they start interacting with each other.

The minimizer minimizes which makes the magnifier magnify even more in order for the minimizer to really get the gravity of the situation. [Laughter] Then the minimizer who handles stress by minimizing and reducing—"It's all under control. No worries, honey. We got this babe." It causes the magnifier to go to 11.

You've got this seesawing interaction. These differences while very normal and understandable and again, nobody's wrong, nobody's right, can create stress and tension in a relationship because we're reacting to each other's individual differences.

Does that make sense?

Ron: Yes, it does. That's a good observation.

Neil: That's a personality difference so it's very unlikely to go away. That's would be in that 69 percent of perpetual stuff. You could learn to like different food. You know a difference, "You like Thai. I don't." You could learn to get over that or try; experiment.

But boy, some of this minimizer, maximizer personality stuff, it's probably going to be with you, so you navigate it. Like, I'm a minimizer. I've learned to try to watch that. But I know I minimize. It tends to make Sharol feel like whatever she just expressed is devalued, because I actually did minimize it.

Ron: Right, right.

Sharol: But it helps me to understand that he's not trying to devalue what I just said. He's actually trying to manage his own stress—

Neil: I am.

Sharol: —or his own anxiety by slowing things down, damping things down—"Let's just calm down everybody." It just helps to understand the differences. Honestly, we say that's the key. The better couples can articulate their differences and where those differences are coming from, it really helps them be able to understand and navigate them together.

Ron: Let's chase that a little bit further. Neil, knowing that he's a minimizer, talking around that, admitting that, owning that part of him, how does that help you, Sharol, feel better about that difference between you?

Sharol: I think understanding it, having him acknowledge that piece, allows me to—then I don't respond by magnifying even more. [Laughter] Then I just kind of sort of "Okay, this is Neil in his minimizing mode." He acknowledges it. I acknowledge it. I don't have to amp it up to get him to see what's going on here. I mean we bumped into this earlier on in our marriage, primarily about money.

Neil: But we didn't have the language.

Sharol: No, we didn't.

Neil: I didn't always understand I was a minimizer. I thought I was just a calm person and in control. Then you start trying to put your lives together—and I think I am kind of a calm person and in control most situations—but I started to realize how that plays when you're trying to build a life together.

Ron: Yes, absolutely. By the way, isn't funny the words we choose when we label ourselves. "I'm calm. I'm in control. Which means you're chaotic and out of control." [Laughter] It's funny how we—

Neil: Which is not true.

Ron: Right. But when we start talking around who we are. Part of that is this awareness of “I know what my motives are. I don’t know what my wife’s motives are. I just know what she did, what she said, how that made me feel,” and I get reactive based on how I feel about what she—but I don’t always know her motives. It’s like, I give myself the benefit of the doubt, but I don’t necessarily give my spouse the benefit of the doubt.

Neil: Sad but true.

Sharol: By the way, this particular difference is not gender related. We bump into couples all the time where the male, the husband, is the magnifier.

Ron: Yes, can’t predict based on gender.

The thing is as we’re talking around this, that I just really want to grab for the listener, is notice the big dynamic shift here. In the first scenario, Sharol, you were describing somebody minimizes and the other person feels like they have to maximize to get the minimizer to acknowledge the difference. Then the minimizer has to minimize even more to get the maximizer to relax on what’s going on.

Essentially, they’re both caught in the dynamic of trying to change the other person and that’s what leaves them stuck running around that same little dance.

But as soon as, as we just heard in your case, Neil says, “You know what? I got to own this part of me, and I got to talk around why I’m minimizing. That’s really about my anxiety. It’s really about this,” or “It’s really about that,” all of a sudden, Sharol doesn’t really have to take ownership of that because Neil is taking ownership of himself. The need for her to maximize is now diminishing. All of a sudden, she’s coming beside him rather than standing in opposition to him.

Sharol: Then when you really have been at it for 41 years, you can—when he says, “Oh, I’m minimizing aren’t I?” I can go, “Yes—” [Laughter]

Neil: Yes, yes.

Sharol: “—and I think it’s adorable.”

Neil: We’ve got so much shorthand now like, “Oh yes, that’s minimizing, isn’t it?”

Ron: See. But that’s really profound. I don’t want people to miss that—41 years. You didn’t just come upon that.

Neil: Oh no.

Ron: Because you’ve been married 41 years. You came on it because you were working at understanding yourself and your partner. Isn’t that the journey of marriage?

Neil: It is.

For me the prime motive is I *love* to feel close to Sharol. I just realized when I'm playing out this dance with her, the result isn't closeness. The result isn't unity. We just get further and further apart. She has to raise her voice more because I'm not getting it. Then I start judging her because she's exaggerating in my judgement. I don't know.

We've got to this stage, and we still have our moments, Ron. There's no doubt about it. Okay, everybody, they don't go away. We still have our moments.

But you know what I think progress is for us? We shorten the time between when we screw up and when we make it right. I think we screw up a little less often. But I think the biggest progress for us is it's almost still on my lips and I go, "Oh, I'm sorry. That was the wrong thing to say. Can I do that over?" Whereas when we were younger, we'd wait a week to get to that point, you know?

Ron: That's really good. Learning about yourself, learning about the other person, being quick to get to that place where you're unwinding who you are and taking ownership of that, that makes a big difference.

Sharol: You know what the other thing about these differences, when your partner recognizes how you're wired and appreciates, even celebrates those, it just validates you as a person. I'm a strong person. Neil's a strong person. Which is why we've had plenty of friction over the years, but I think it's made us a lively vibrant couple.

I think when we've learned to celebrate those differences and, as Neil said, when we bump into them and we hurt each other, we're quicker to repair. I'd way rather have that marriage than a marriage where there's *no* tension and everything's kind of tamped down and flatlined and we're trying to—I don't know, anyway.

Ron: I agree. There's no refinement there.

Sharol: I like some spark.

Ron: Yes, absolutely. And you're not refining anything. You're just kind of laying there. You're not moving. You're not going anywhere. But a marriage that makes you work a little bit is growing you up, it's helping you be a better person, it's moving you toward the image of Christ ultimately. That's a good thing.

Okay, a little earlier I said we're going to come back to something. As I read your article—which to the listener by the way is in the show notes—you can find that article there—you said something, Sharol, earlier, I think was really good and that is, "Why are people trying to eliminate the differences?"

When they're in the elimination stage, why are they trying to eliminate? You suggested that it is because they're trying to move closer to their partner.

Sharol: One of the things that I would say has defined our philosophy about marriage ministry is to try to find the *best* possible reason for couples' bad behavior and pull that out when you're coaching. "Why is that a problem for you and why are you irritated by that?"

I think if you dig deep enough and come at it with the lens of trying to find out where there's a positive reason for the behavior, a lot of times you'll come up with that. They're trying to get closer to their partner or they're fearful of losing their partner or alienating. They're worried about the drift that they sense in their relationship, so they're trying—and albeit oftentimes we try in the wrong ways—but they're *trying* to come closer, to draw together.

If you can identify that positive piece, then couples are way more willing to talk about the behavior. But if you just start talking about the bad behavior or the poor way they're treating each other, then they start getting into defense mode: "I did because she did," and "He said because I said..."

If you can kind of clear the clutter and say, "Yes, but what are you trying to accomplish? What do you really want?"

Ron: As a marriage and family therapist I think one of the greatest ironies as I work with couples is exactly what you just said. They are both playing chess, trying to win a match, to prove to the other person that they really *want* the other person more than the other person thinks they want them to be wanted.

Neil: Wow.

Sharol: You should write that down.

Ron: I don't think I can. I don't think I can repeat that. [Laughter]

They both desperately *want* the marriage to work. It's just, "From my point of view, you being a spender and me being a saver. This marriage is in jeopardy. It's going to cost us something and it moves us away from each other because we value money differently and manage it differently. We really can't be close and together. The environment of our relationship is not safe, so I don't know what to do but to try to make it safe. So I need you to change."

Neil: I love that safe word because when we're safe that's the right place to grow intimacy. I think sometimes this drive to change the other person or eliminate is driven by fear at times, too.

Ron: Absolutely.

Neil: Because if you bought the myth that our differences will make us divorce someday—either maybe it's been in your past—it's been in your family's past, or you've bought the myth that if I married the *right* person, we'd never have conflict—all those things—then when you start to see your differences and they persist past the honeymoon and they persist into year five, you start going, “I think we're going to break up because of this.” Then the fear kicks in and that's not a good place.

Safety is so good.

Ron: Yes. We've got to dial down our fear, don't we? Right?

That's another one of those moments where I've got to know this about me. Because if I don't dial down my fear, it's going to run rampant in me—back to those little tools that we use to try to change the other person or the situation—and I get even more controlling or more manipulative or more demanding or more critical.

Now, none of that works, so what do we do with that?

Neil: Here's another layer. We're talking about differences. We have different fears. Some of us live with a higher level of risk that we're comfortable with. Others don't like living with much level of risks, so you even have differences in this area of your differences. [Laughter]

Ron: Yes.

Sharol: No wonder it's hard to be married.

Ron: In this article you talk about the other dynamic, the drift, where couples wake up one day and go, “I don't know who we are together. I don't know—how'd we get so far apart?”

Sharol: Yes, that's probably more pertinent to our story. I mean while we have had differences, for the most part, our differences have made us better and we've enjoyed the process of discovering each other. But the drift pieces, that has been the harder pieces. That's where our—really our marriage almost went off the rails. It did go off the rails temporarily, primarily, in our case, because of busyness in a season of our marriage.

Here's the hard news is that our biggest season of drift happened about 18, 19 years into marriage. We were raising teenagers. We had two really demanding careers. We were super involved in the community, super involved in the church, doing all sorts of good things. We had just drifted so far apart that we were like literally roommates living in the same house—very nice, accommodating, cooperative roommates.

We weren't mean. There was no yelling and screaming. We were stoic Scandinavians. We don't do that. But we had really lost each other in the middle of that and not intentionally and not purposefully. Boy, when we found ourselves in that spot, we kind of looked at each other like, "How did this happen? How did we get here?"

Actually, one of the most beneficial pieces of our marriage ministry is helping couples identify that drift earlier on than we did and really build those kinds of places into their marriage that will prevent the drift from happening. Because it's inevitable. It's a natural part of a relationship. After that—all that hormonal stuff wears off, 18-24 months, relationships are inclined to drift, so we have to build in things that intentionally bring us closer together. If we don't, we will drift farther and farther apart.

Ron: Yes, I think our listeners probably are aware Nan and I have a very similar story to that. There's a season of our life where I was chasing work and ministry and career. Then it got selfish. I was basically building my kingdom and didn't even realize it. I'd crossed over from working on God's kingdom to working on my own kingdom.

Nan got busy in our children and her job. Yes, we woke up one day and went, "Oh my goodness. We're a long, long ways apart." We discovered that and got help. It was a turning point for us.

Somewhere in the midst of that process, God even gave me this life or death experience where I almost died in a scuba diving accident. It showed me what I had done to my wife. To this day, it is a visceral experience in my heart that I realize what I did. It's been life changing. I now know what the demons are. Nan and I talk about the dragon in my temptations to pursue those things and how I just have to constantly work on that.

Neil: So true.

Ron: Yes. I just think it's easy for us to slip into that, even with good intentions. Life demands that.

Neil: In our work and in the research in Canada, which is where we live and work most of the time, we see that the differences come to play—they play every couple—but differences come to play a lot in younger marriages.

Couples get married. They're a little surprised because dating went so well or this is the man of my dreams/the woman of my dreams, "She's the one," so they're a little surprised at their differences. The first big bulge in divorce in Canada is about year four. It's often quite calculated: "Hey, we haven't been together that long. We don't have much property. Maybe we don't have kids. We should get out because you're not the one."

Sharol: Because if you were the one, we wouldn't have so much conflict.

Ron: Yes, right.

Neil: A lot of it is unresolved differences. I mean we all struggle with differences or need to navigate them. But there's also lots of data about the silver wave of divorce. In Canada you can see the stats in about 25 years of marriage, lots of couples part. Yes, it's tactical. The kids are older or whatever, but it's this drift thing.

Ron: Yes, yes.

Neil: We talked to couples all the time. In fact, some of them are really quite sad because they know they're a million miles apart. But they're so discouraged. They go, "I don't know how to get back to where we once were."

Boy, the sooner we can be alert to the currents of drift, external currents like busyness, external currents like the economy, like COVID if—

Ron: Right.

Neil: There's these things that we're not necessarily even responsible for sometimes but they happen to us from the outside and they push us apart, if we're not careful.

Then there's all the internal stuff. You talked about selfishness in your story. Man, every one of us struggles with selfishness. We need to manage our internal health and wellbeing. Fortunately, there's a lot of good resources out there. But we better pay attention to it because that causes drift too.

Ron: Okay, so in a minute I want to come back and ask you guys give me an example in your marriage. I'll give you one from mine of an internal dynamic that you're aware of, that you're working on, that you know if you do this it's likely to help contribute to drift, alright. We'll come back to that in just a second.

By the way, I would just add a little commentary to what you said. I think the silver divorce thing is very much true in the US, as well. From what I hear, that's true around the world.

I think blended family couples, the drift is accelerated.

Neil: Okay.

Ron: I think what accelerates it for many couples is the complexity of their family and life and all the demands. You're trying to navigate your differences. What a lot of couples in first marriages—they have a few years, if not many years to navigate their

differences, build romance, solidify their relationship. Then they have kids. Life gets a little more complicated at that point.

Not blended couples, right? Bam! You are dealing with kids and former spouses and the past and debt from the past and trying to figure out a sex life and trying to figure out to navigate your own finances *and* navigate your differences, so the drift gets accelerated by all that stuff.

You're just so preoccupied with things that add stress to your life and so avoidance, or con—it's either one or the other—it's either conflict at each other, or it's avoidance; moving away from each other. But at the end of the day, it's similar dynamics. It's differences and drift that are really at play. The timing just seems to be a little bit different around that.

Okay, so let me give you an example of something that's an internal piece in my marriage that I know I'm aware of that really makes a difference. It contributes to drift and it's something that just in the last month Nan and I have really started dialoguing and talking about.

It is very easy for me when I'm having a conversation with my wife—by the way, I'm pretty good listener—I'm your better than average male listener—I got—I have a whole clinical training background that's helped me be a good listener below levels and listen for meaning that's not being said and all kinds of things.

My wife's a talker, so when she's got stuff in her, boy, she—whatever she's thinking or feeling, it's coming out—she's a verbal processor—that's how she figures out what she's really feeling is by talking it through—in the early part of that when she's talking, I will hear something and, in my mind, I'll start chasing that piece.

I'm chasing it at five levels and different meaning and I've just stopped listening. Because at that point, she's gone on to the next one and the next subject and the next subject. Then there's this other thing over here and I don't listen. I don't hear that because my mind gets kind of wrapped up in the first part of it.

You better believe she knows when I'm not listening. [Laughter] She knows my eyes are on a different place. She knows I'm not in attunement with her. Then she feels that. Then she's like, "Okay, he doesn't care about this." That's the next assumption on her part that not listening equals not caring. That's something we've had to talk through.

But essentially the discipline for me is I've got to prevent my head from chasing that little bit of information too far so that it takes me away from the conversation that's happening in the immediate time frame.

You guys got an example of something like that?

Sharol: It's very similar actually. Slightly different take on it but I will sometimes when I hear Neil start to talk about something, I'm very quick to fill in the blanks. Like, "Okay, I've heard this story before. I know what he thinks about this."

Neil: And you probably have. [Laughter]

Sharol: "I know what he thinks. He's going—I know where this is going." I tend to tune it out and it's like, "Oh, I know this story. I know how this ends up. I know what he needs. I know what he thinks." Then I just kind of tune out.

I think there's a real danger in that when you've been married a long time and a lot of times I'm probably right. I probably do know what he's thinking, but it's very disrespectful to presume to know what your partner's saying or thinking or feeling based on—even if it is based on 41 years of experience, it's still disrespectful. I've had to learn to *not* fill in the blanks but let him finish his story and tell me what he is really thinking. I think it's pretty easy to happen when you've been in a relationship for a long time.

Matter of fact, there's some research actually that says we become tone deaf to the voices that we most frequently hear. When you've been married a long time, you actually might tune out your partner's voice more and more even than other voices. So you have to be even more proactive to be attentively listening and responding and letting them finish their sentences and their stories.

Neil: Here's an interesting research out of Queens University—but they had had a nice little ending and maybe because we've been married 41 years, I really liked this—it said as couples age, they actually start tuning back into each other more, because you're more dependent on that person.

Because the research finding was when we get too much coming at us, we filter out the familiar to try to pick up the new and the novel. I think when we're—man, when we're busy building our careers and our kids and all that mayhem—you're blending your family—I mean when—boy, when the RPMs are really high, that's when you really tend to tune out the ones that are close to you.

Ron: The thing I want the listener to take away here is marriage is an ongoing discipline in which I have to, number one, first and foremost, be accountable to my Lord. In the process of doing that, the Holy Spirit's going to show me things about me that are not in keeping with being like Jesus. As I identify those things, we're going to work on them. We keep working on that.

If I'm doing that around *me*, it is bound to make it easier for my spouse to do the same about her. Because the humility in me is catchy. It invites the other person to do the same.

As soon as I take that opposite posture of pride and start trying to change my wife, now I'm focused on her and what she should be and who she is and "This difference in you is driving me crazy," and "We can eliminate that." That's going to raise defensiveness and resistance in her. Now all of a sudden, she's going to be focused on changing me and now we got problems.

It is such a different dynamic when we're both willing to deal with us first and then bring that to the equation of our us. I think it's easier to get there.

Neil: You mentioned the word pride in that comment. Sharol and I read this verse—I mean we read it for lots—we've been reading the Bible our whole adult lives—even while we were kids—but in 1 Peter it says, "God resists the proud." That's a chilling moment. It isn't just like, "Hey, pride creates defensiveness in your spouse. That's destructive. That's bad." But read the verse for yourself in 1 Peter: "God resists the proud," and "gives grace to the humble."

Sharol: Yes. It's a scary thought.

Ron: Around here we say, "...and so do spouses." They resist our pride and they give grace to us when we're humble, yes. It's kind of that universal principle. But that just means I have to go to work on me before I start going to work on you. I think that makes a huge difference.

Neil: Could I go back, Ron? You asked a question. You asked us about an example of drift in our marriage?

Ron: Yes.

Neil: Over the years, I think I've come to see what creates drift is my unwillingness to engage Sharol honestly about how our relationship is doing.

There's a whole complex thing. I've been coming to understand myself over a long period of time. I'm a youngest child. I like to have fun. I like to keep things light. The home I was raised in, which I'm very grateful for—lovely home—but whenever things were tense, "Let's go out in the backyard and have fun."

I mean kind of an avoiding. I learned avoiding at a lot of different levels, practiced that in our marriage over a long period of time, and it really contributed to drift.

Then the other side is when you avoid for a long time, you start to get really afraid. Like, "I don't know if I can engage." Like, "I don't know if I have the emotional vocabulary. What if I say something stupid?" It's like me and French, right. I'm afraid to speak French. I know a little bit. But I'm afraid I'm going to say something stupid or offend somebody.

That caused a lot of drift in our marriage. “I just want to keep things happy. I don’t want to talk about hard things,” created a lot of drift. I had to come to grips with why I’m that way, and then be honest about the way it was robbing us of intimacy.

Ron: How did you come to grips with that? I mean what’s been the journey for you to see the different layers or pieces to that?

Neil: At that moment where Sharol and I were really that far apart and we realized this was not the marriage we signed up for; it’s not the marriage we wanted. It wasn’t even the marriage we once had anymore.

We started to do a little excavating because we were committed to it. We said, “Let’s figure it out. Let’s figure it out.” Neither of us are quitters. We’re both strategic. We’re both kind of like, “We will not get defeated here.”

In the excavation, that’s when I started to say, “What did I contribute to this?” Because we had this huge drift that Sharol talked about. I started—and this is a great place for folks to try to sort out—ask yourself, “What did I do? What’s my contribution here?”

My contribution was avoidance. I just realized tons of avoidance.

Ron: I just think that’s huge that you were willing to ask the question, “What did I contribute?” I mean that’s an act of humility right there. Then to say, “You know what. I may have contributed some stuff that I had really good intentions around or from my point of view should have brought about good things for us. Is it possible that didn’t bring about good? Somehow within the combination of who you are and who I am that didn’t create a healthy us.”

That’s been one of the sobering things for me is I know my motivations. I have good will towards my wife. I’m trying to do great things for us. Yet some of those great things that I embark on actually don’t bring about good results just because of the way it moves in and out of our us-ness.

For me to go, “Huh, I guess that’s another piece of me I’ve got to stop. I’ve got to work on. I’ve got to change. I’ve got to alter,” that, too, is humility walking itself out. Those are challenging moments, but the reward is so good.

Sharol: One of the things that we decided to do when we found ourselves in that season of drift was, we decided that we would be as honest as we possibly could be going forward. For us, that meant confronting these avoidances because I’m an avoider too.

Actually, a lot of our drift happened because we actually were good hearted towards each other. We were super busy, so something would come up in my brain and I’d think, “We probably should talk about this. This would be important to our relationship.

Let's talk about it. But we're so busy and he's got so much on his plate. We'll talk about it another time."

Eventually, we piled up so many of those un-had conversations that it was intimidating to start tackling them. But we decided that we were going to start tackling those things one by one when they'd arise. We wouldn't let anything go past the following weekend. If something came to mind, "We should talk about this. This is important for our relationship." We wouldn't let it go more than a week.

We had a rough year. Let me tell you. That year—we called it the year of honesty.

Neil: —year of hell. [Laughter]

Ron: Otherwise known as the year of hell.

Neil: I wanted to have the year of sex, but it wasn't going to happen.

Sharol: No, that was not happening at that point. Probably never at any point. [Laughter] That just sounds exhausting.

Neil: Sounds awesome. [Laughter] Once a week we set aside time.

Sharol: We deliberately worked our way through those honest conversations and just would not let ourselves go to avoidance.

Neil: I know that sounds sort of unromantic. But we got—a lot of the drift was busyness as Sharol said, so that's part of the solution. We actually put it on our calendar; said, "Every Sunday night, 9:00, we are talking, just us." Because I mean if calendar's your enemy, then use calendar to solve your problem.

We went through a phase where we calendarized sex for a while, because just try to demystify it, try to simplify it. So if calendar's your enemy use your calendar to help you.

Sharol: Neil started marking in Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—

Neil: Yes, that didn't work. [Laughter]

Sharol: That's not what we're talking about.

Ron: It's funny how that repeat thing is there.

Sharol: Yes, yes.

Ron: But you spent a year. You did the hard work. You had to buckle down and do that. I just want to say to our listener, if it's not now, there's going to be a day. Maybe

repetitive days in your marriage. If you're anything like Josephsons and the Deals, that's absolutely the case.

Over and over and over again you just come to these places where you go, "Yes, we've got a little work to do. Let's just buckle down. Let's trust God. Let's walk through. Let's be disciplined to do the hard work so that we can find ourselves on the other side."

You've been listening to my conversation with Neil and Sharol Josephson. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

I asked Neil and Sharol what their favorite advice is for couples. We'll hear their thoughts in just a minute. But before that, do me a favor right now. Would you give us a quick review? We got this one from Australia. It came in through Apple Podcasts. She said, "I thank God for this podcast and the people who contribute to it. This resource is a gift to couples who have taken the plunge and are trying to raise a stepfamily."

This one came in from Amanda on YouTube. She says, "Awesome. This is the encouragement I need right now. I'm going through a lot. God is pursuing me so much. I'm beyond thankful."

Amanda, we're thankful this has been a blessing to you. That's why we're here. You'll notice that Amanda is listening on YouTube. Yes, you can subscribe to this podcast on YouTube or Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts, and of course, now on the new FamilyLife app. Just search, *FamilyLife Blended* with Ron Deal, and remember to look at the show notes for links to additional resources and information about the FamilyLife Podcast Network.

You know there was one piece in the Josephson's article that we did not get to in our conversation. They had some suggestions for overcoming the drift. Just setting up some routines in life to try to help you avoid the drift. You'll notice a pattern here. There's something daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. The first thing they suggest you do is take ten minutes every day to talk together as a couple; not about the kids or the chores and no devices. Put all that stuff away and just talk.

And they suggest a half day or an evening a week spent together. Whether that's a date night, whatever you want to call it, spend a little time each week together. Then they suggest one day every month doing something that renews your relationship. As they think back to some things that you did maybe when you were dating or newly married, maybe learn a new something together. Go on a hike, garden, golf, find something that's important to you and that you enjoy doing together.

Then they suggest one weekend a year, get away, renew your relationship, work on some skills in your relationship, but just spend some focused time together. Again, notice the rhythm. There's something there to do daily, something weekly, monthly, and annually.

But here's the thing, sometimes couples discover that straightforward suggestions like these don't really help them overcome their drift. In other words, if you try these ideas but can't keep it up, can't sustain it or it doesn't give you the outcome that you were looking for, you need more than just more time together. In fact, time together may just make things worse because of the circumstances that you're in. For whatever reason, you just need a little more help.

Let me suggest that you get a coach if you find yourself in that situation—a mentor, maybe it's a therapist, a pastor. There's no shame in this. By the way, SmartStepfamilies.com, my personal website, has a growing list of what I call Smart Stepfamily Therapy Providers around the country. Check that out for a referral. Maybe one of them is near you or you can contact them online.

Again, that's SmartStepfamilies.com. When more time together isn't helping, acknowledge that you need a little help. Nan and I have sought out help from many advisors throughout our marriage. We have never regretted it and I don't think you will either.

If you'd like more information about my guests, you'll find it in the show notes or you can check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

While you're there, make sure you check out everything FamilyLife has for your marriage and family. Our division, FamilyLife Blended, has the world's largest collection of articles, videos, resources and books for blended families. Like the book, *The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning*. Check us out at FamilyLife.com.

Hey, remember to share this with somebody. Think of a friend or a family member or somebody you care about. You think this might be helpful to them. Just send it through a text or however you want to share and let them know you're thinking about them.

Now, before we're done, here's Neil and Sharol sharing their favorite tips for couples:

Neil: Make your spouse feel like the most loved, secure person in the world and whatever that takes. You need to know them to really do that to the best of your ability. Because what feels safe and secure and loved to one person, isn't the same as the other person.

Ron: That's right.

Neil: That's why I love that question, because it's going to drive you towards each other and then act that way. Because I'm convinced of this: the Bible says, "Perfect love casts out all fear." When your spouse is feeling safer, he or she is going to love you better, more sweetly, more satisfyingly. Make them feel safe, loved.

Sharol: What he said. [Laughter]

Ron: Next time, we'll hear from Bob and Vicki Maday about navigating stepfamily relationships in adult stepfamilies, and we'll hear from two of their adult children as well.

Jonell: Naturally I was thinking I would be coming home for Christmas. But instead I was coming to a new house, a new environment. I mean it wasn't even our same Christmas tree, so there was *a lot* that was different for me when I came home for Christmas that first year.

Ron: That's Bob and Vicki Maday, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thank you to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible.

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